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SUBJECT: Bloggers, Officials React to Sanctions, Diplomatic Row

Summary

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1. (SBU) Post has monitored the Belarusian public's reaction to recent events in the country including Belneftekhim sanctions, Belarus' recall of its Ambassador to the U.S., GOB demands for American Embassy staff reductions and the resulting suspension of some consular operations, and a spurious prime-time "expose" of an alleged 10-person "spy ring" recruited and instructed by the U.S. Embassy. The internet community actively debated and speculated on possible repercussions of U.S. economic and EU extended travel sanctions and blamed the GOB for the Embassy's reduction in consular services. Most agreed that spy allegations against Embassy personnel were unfounded. Independent experts concurred with bloggers that GOB officials have little leverage over the U.S. other than pressure on the Embassy, and voiced hopes that sanctions would press the GOB to undertake steps toward democratization in the future. A few officials overtly expressed indignation over increased international pressure, though some dismissed the sanctions as mere political posturing. End summary.

Bloggers Blame GOB for American Consular Services Suspension

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2. (U) The sanctions against Belneftekhim and GOB demands for U.S. Embassy staff cuts received wide coverage and extensive comments on the popular Belarusian internet news portal TUT.by and opposition site Charter97.org. TUT.by bloggers particularly blamed the GOB for its steps that led to the suspension of some consular services at the Embassy. Common Belarusians expressed their outrage with a "narrow circle of hidebound people banned from anywhere but Iran and Honduras" whom they blamed for stopping common people from receiving American visas in Minsk. They called the GOB "small people trying to overcome their big [inferiority] complexes" struggling for "who knows what and why," and suggested "as long as the goals [of the fight] are unclear, they will always be in the right."

3. (U) Charter97.org forum participants pessimistically concurred that they are used to suffering due to Aleksandr Lukashenko's ambitions and seemed resigned to suffer from the USG's ambition to spread democracy as well. Radio Liberty surveyed over 330 of its website readers and concluded that 78 percent held the GOB responsible for the temporary suspension of visa operations with only eight percent blaming the USG, and three percent blaming the Belarusian opposition. Nine percent of respondents claimed they never wanted to travel to the U.S. anyway. Bloggers humorously expressed compassion for the American diplomats who departed Belarus and thus became itinerant workers and will miss out on such treasures of Belarus as tours of the Stalin Line and the National

Library, the "taste of locally brewed beer," and who with their departure would be forced to "hole up" in Hawaii.

#### Parity for All

14. (U) Poking fun at the GOB's rationale for demanding staff cuts at the Embassy -- the need for parity in the sizes of our missions -- a majority of bloggers warned the U.S. Embassy of possible further GOB demands based on the concepts of parity and equality. Some ideas of possible demands included the following: "to even out the populations" of Belarus and the U.S. so the GOB-controlled Youth Union could expand its membership with American youth; "to reach parity in salaries," so Belarusians would earn 10 times more; "to reach parity in life expectancy" as the rate in Belarus remains 10 years lower than the U.S. rate; "to even mortgage rates," so common Belarusians could afford cheaper housing; and "construction of agricultural rural towns in the U.S. and introduction of [government-controlled] golden shares at IBM and General Motors."

15. (U) Joking aside, TUT.by visitors also stressed the necessity for the GOB to follow the U.S. example of democratic elections and to allow citizens to freely express themselves and to exercise their inalienable rights guaranteed by the Constitution. Internet readers also called on the GOB to look at "the balance" of tourist, business, and student trips between the two countries and try to attract the same high number of Americans to Belarus.

#### A Fly or Two in the Ointment Of "Flawless" U.S.-Belarus Relations

16. (U) A March 23 report shown on the Belarusian First National Channel (BT) alleging that a U.S. diplomat headed a ten-man cabal of local Embassy employees spying for the USG amused bloggers the most and raised heated discussions in online forums. Most bloggers called the expose yet another "fly in the ointment" of "wonderful"

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bilateral relations. Most jokingly agreed on the BT reporters' "high level of professionalism," since they were able to uncover the spies before even the BKGB could. A BKGB spokesperson confirmed the incident two days after the report aired, alleging they did not detain any "suspects." Bloggers warned Belarusians about possessing the commonplace equipment purportedly used for intelligence gathering: cameras, binoculars, and cell phones. Also, they ironically noted the Belarusian employees involved had not been detained because when "they swore in English," the BKGB took it for "repenting." Many "concerned" forum participants suggested the GOB should proceed with "removing" spy groups from Minsk as well as entrepreneurs from the markets, beer from the kiosks, and local computer networks from residential apartment buildings, and questioned who would be "next in line" as a target of official action.

#### How Many is Too Many For GOB Officials?

17. (U) Senator Nikolay Cherginets, banned from travel to the U.S. and EU, was one of the few high-level officials to comment overtly on U.S. Embassy operations and forced staff reduction. In comments to reporters, he maintained that the suspension of visa processing was aimed "at pressuring Belarus and intensifying the crisis in [bilateral] relations." In response to an Embassy statement that its "resources are engaged in addressing other priorities," Cherginets expressed "nothing but surprise" and stated that there should be no higher priority in a host country than "establishing and developing relations" by means of "providing visa support." He commended the demand for staff reduction and elaborated that Belarusian diplomats based in the U.S. "neither instruct the local opposition nor participate in antigovernment events" while the U.S. Embassy "has too many officers who have nothing [else] to do here." Cherginets wished the USG "sober times" and "calm rhetoric" for when "the time for talks and discussions comes."

#### Officials Offended By EU Travel Ban Extension

¶8. (U) Following the EU's one-year extension of its travel ban April 7, a ban which Cherginets labeled "political provocation," the senator emphasized that he never refused meetings requested by EU officials because he understands that tangible "results may be reached only through dialogue." According to Cherginets, any sanctions show that counterparts "are not willing to establish normal relations with Belarus." On a personal note, he asserted that he "is not fond of vacationing in European countries" because he "only gets tired there."

¶9. (U) Cherginets' colleague, state TV and Radio Broadcasting Chairperson Senator Aleksandr Zimovskiy expressed resentment over the fact that it was merely "low-level" EU Transport Ministers endorsing the travel ban extension, whereas in the U.S. it was President Bush who "personally" introduced the travel ban and asset freeze sanctions against himself and other. He called this "unacceptable."

Comment

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¶10. (SBU) Though an internet sample does not necessarily capture the older, more conservative sector of society, based on post's study of bloggers there seems to be little support among the population for the GOB's recent steps, and few people believe official media spin doctors. However, as long as the GOB is able to manipulate the media and insulate itself from pressure from its people, the regime is unlikely to change tack.

MOORE  
LEADER